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The Politburo's Management of Its America Problem

Executive Summary

Harry Gelman

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PREFACE

The essay that follows represents conclusions distilled from a recently published Rand report that draws on the record of Soviet leadership behavior over the last decade to construct a picture of Soviet assumptions about the relationship with the United States. This study was prepared under the sponsorship of the Director of Net Assessment, Department of Defense, as part of an ongoing project that aims at working out an improved U.S. strategy for managing the long-term competition with the Soviet Union.

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One central observation about the Soviet perspective emerges from this study. This is that the Politburo sees the world as a single, interrelated, many-faceted battlefield. The Soviet leaders regard their management of their bilateral relations with the United States as but one aspect of their interaction with the United States on a thousand other fronts around the world.

Moreover, in the great majority of cases in this interaction, the Soviet leaders take for granted that their interests and those of the United States are incompatible. The members of the Politburo do not believe that they can further improve or, indeed, defend the geopolitical position of the Soviet Union unless that of the United States is further weakened.

The Politburo knows that U.S. setbacks do not guarantee Soviet advances. But the Politburo is convinced that such setbacks—or, more broadly, a reduction of Western influence generally—are a prerequisite for the growth of Soviet presence and influence in any given area.

All this does not mean that the Soviet leaders have a "master plan" for further advance at U.S. expense. On the contrary, the variables at play on the world are usually far too many and too complex for the Politburo to anticipate in any detail. Moreover, observation of Soviet behavior over a long period strongly suggests that the Politburo decisionmaking time horizon is very short.

However, although the Politburo does not have a blueprint, it does have an unblinking expectation of lasting struggle with what it regards as the central antagonist—the United States—whatever the momentary temperature of the bilateral relationship. As a result, the Soviet leaders have a stable framework from which to assign priorities and explore avenues of opportunity as they emerge.

THE WORLD ARENA

What this means in practice can be visualized if we take a bird's eye view of Soviet behavior today in representative segments of the world arena. What do we observe?

First, in West Europe, we see a vigorous Soviet appeal to the divergent sense of self-interest of some U.S. allies in the preservation of their economic and security relationships with the Soviet Union. We see the Soviets pressing hard on these lines of cleavage, seeking, if possible, to isolate the United States, and at a minimum, to lever U.S. policy in a direction more favorable to Soviet interests.

At the same time, in the Third World, we see the Soviets persevering in what they regard as a long-term process of gradually advancing

Soviet influence into more and more previously Western-influenced and Western-oriented areas. In this process, the Soviet leaders expect and accept occasional setbacks, even major setbacks, as an inevitable part of the ebb and flow of advance on a gradually widening front.

Meanwhile, in its policy toward China, we see the Politburo alarmed by the growth of Sino-American alignment in recent years, but determined to pay no important price to either antagonist to put an end to it. We see the Soviet leadership trying to split the weaker of its opponents, China, away from the stronger one, the United States, thus far without success, while persisting in those competitive assaults on the interests of both that tend to drive them together.

Finally, in what the Politburo regards as its own inner sphere, we see:

- on the one hand, in Afghanistan, the long-term, methodical continuation of the Soviet effort at pacification and digestion; and
- on the other hand, on the opposite side of the world, the simultaneous endeavor of the Soviet leadership to force the genie back into the bottle in Poland. The Politburo seeks to accomplish this, if possible, without taking the kind of violent measures that might undermine Soviet efforts to weaken the American position in Western Europe; yet it remains prepared to pay that price should this prove necessary.

THE OFFENSIVE ESSENCE OF SOVIET DEFENSIVE CONCERNS

If one were to seek to sum up all this behavior, and attempt to characterize in two words the Soviet posture toward the United States today, the words that seem most appropriate are "defensive" and "coercive." These two apparent opposites in fact summarize the essence of the Politburo's attitude toward the world. They are opposite sides of the same coin.

The Soviets are "defensive" in the sense that they see themselves as defending *gains* of the last decade—a long series of net improvements in their position in the world relative to the West and to the United States. These gains they believe the United States is now trying to undo.

In the last year, and most recently at the 26th Soviet party congress in February 1981, the Soviet leaders have made it clear that they see the United States as attempting to reverse trends in what they call the world correlation of forces, trends that on balance have been favorable

to Soviet interests and unfavorable to the Americans in the 1970s. It is important to emphasize that the Soviet leadership sees these favorable net changes as only partly military, and partly also political, social, or economic.

The Politburo is profoundly impressed by the train of spectacular U.S. misfortunes over the past decade—in Vietnam, in Africa, and in Iran. The Politburo is sure that this sequence of events is an objective good in itself, because it changes the *relative* position of the Soviet Union and the United States.

To be sure, the Soviet leadership is well aware that there is another side of the ledger, a negative side from their perspective, as in the case of Poland and with regard to China. Furthermore, the Soviets are also fully aware that not every U.S. loss produces an immediate Soviet gain (as has been the case, thus far, in Iran). In addition, they are equally well aware that not every Soviet gain endures; here Egypt is a case in point.

Despite these considerations, there is reason to believe that when the Soviet leaders do their geopolitical sums, the trends of the last decade have reinforced their expectation that over the long run, and on balance, Soviet net gains at the expense of the United States will continue to grow. They are determined to do their best to promote this process. They see the United States as now trying to halt it, and to push them back. Moreover, they also see the United States as seeking, in the process, to isolate and surround them.

At the same time, however, and by the same token, Soviet policy is coercive. This does not mean that the Soviet leadership seeks confrontation with the United States. Rather, the Politburo is striving to so shape the international environment as to compel the United States to legitimize those gains the Soviet Union has already made, and also to weaken the U.S. capability to resist further Soviet exploitation of competitive advantages in the world arena.

In short, there is, from the U.S. perspective, an offensive essence to Soviet defensive concerns.

THE FAMILY OF SOVIET COMPETITIVE INTERESTS

In consequence, conduct that may seem to the Soviet leadership to be required to defend its interests may well appear to others as a threat to their interests. The two sets of perceptions are not incompatible: again, these are two sides of the same coin.

Today, the Politburo perceives itself as defending three kinds of Soviet interests against U.S. attacks.

First, the Soviet leaders are defending the legitimacy of their existing empire (as in Poland), and also their right to expand that empire whenever prompted to do so by emerging opportunity and perception of security interest (as in Afghanistan). In short, they insist on what they regard as their gravitational rights as a great power.

Second, the Soviets are defending the legitimacy of an expanding—that is, supplanting—world role. Although this is often depicted by Soviet spokesmen as a quest for equality with the United States, the Soviet leaders generally see it as an effort to supplant U.S. influence. The Politburo appears to believe that if the Soviet Union does not advance further at U.S. expense, it may fall back. From these convictions derive the universal Soviet compulsion to attack the U.S. position in the world. It is precisely this attacking essence of Soviet policy toward U.S. influence and presence in the world at large which the Politburo has sought, over the last decade, to persuade the United States to accept as compatible with detente.

Although particular kinds of Soviet behavior may or may not be repeated in a particular context, depending on circumstances, the propensity to seek to supplant, which drives it all, is unabating and, in the Politburo's view, uncompromisable. Because the attacking compulsion is insatiable, it is incompatible with Politburo acceptance of any point of final equilibrium with the United States.

A third set of claims that the Soviets see themselves as defending against U.S. attack involves the legitimacy of asymmetrical security rights. That is, the Soviet leadership sees itself as defending favorable asymmetries in its military matchups with antagonists in different arenas that have evolved over time and that it now sees the United States as also trying to undo.

Thus, in Europe, where the Soviets have long had certain advantages as a result of the existing inequality in such categories as tanks and troop strength, they now also seek to preserve the additional local advantages more recently achieved in the nuclear field through the unilateral deployment of the SS-20 IRBM and the Backfire bomber. They therefore define this asymmetry as equilibrium, and they are doing their utmost to prevent the West from responding.

Similarly, on the other side of the world, in their buildup along the Sino-Soviet border, the Soviets have assembled a firepower advantage over the Chinese that is continually growing, and that in the view of most Western observers greatly exceeds Soviet deterrent needs. The Politburo appears genuinely to believe that it has a legitimate right to this advantage as an instrument of insurance, and also as a means of geopolitical pressure upon China with which to defend Soviet political interests. The Politburo is aggrieved at the prospect that the United

States may supply the Chinese the wherewithal even to reduce this Soviet advantage.

Finally, in the strategic matchup with the United States, over the last decade the Soviet leadership has taken measures whose cumulative effect is now well known. These are steps the Soviet leaders may regard as essential to defend their geopolitical interests, but from the U.S. perspective they seem to go far beyond Soviet deterrent needs and reflect Soviet pursuit of a war-fighting capability.

In sum, for the Politburo, adequate defense of Soviet interests has created a family of requirements:

- forcible addition of Afghanistan to the inner sphere of Soviet control;
- continuous outward pressure against the U.S. position in the third world and in Europe; and
- vigilant preservation of unequal security balances in regional theaters, each unilaterally defined as "equilibrium."

This set of attitudes is likely to be justified privately by the Politburo's assumption that Soviet interests can be defended only at the expense of the antagonist and, once again, are fundamentally incompatible with his interests.

THE DOMINANT CURRENT OF POLICY IN THE 1970s

These assumptions have affected particular Soviet dealings with the United States by determining the underlying policy context surrounding all Soviet-U.S. bilateral interactions.

The Soviet competitive instincts described—the "attacking compulsion"—have driven a single dominant current of Soviet policy over the last decade. Moreover, this policy current has steadily grown in vigor before, during, and since the detente period of 1971-74.

This has been reflected in increasingly assertive Soviet behavior shown continuously in more and more diverse arenas from the late 1960s on:

- beginning with Soviet perception at the outset of the decade of the advantages to be derived from the needs of their Arab clients in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the new opportunities this offered for the expansion of the Soviet military and naval presence;
- continuing with the flood of weapons supplied to Vietnam through the middle 1970s, overlapping the period of detente—

these weapons furnished a decisive prerequisite for the eventual gratifying U.S. humiliation in 1975:

- continuing thereafter with the windfalls and new techniques—such as the large-scale use of Cuban proxy forces—discovered in Africa after 1975; and
- culminating with the Soviet adventures in Indochina and Afghanistan at the close of the decade.

This continuous current of behavior was driven by the Politburo's incremental discovery of the growing capability of Soviet military power to enhance the Soviet geopolitical position relative to that of the United States. In the use of this power, the Soviet leaders were enticed through the decade by the periodic emergence of successive avenues of opportunities. These opportunities were indeed partly created for the Soviets by spontaneous local processes, such as the breakup of the Portuguese empire in Africa by 1975, or the Cambodian provocation of the Vietnamese before 1978. But the Soviet opportunities were enhanced by the widespread impression after 1975—after the U.S. Vietnam debacle—that the United States was contracting its role and capabilities as a global actor.

Detente with the U.S. from 1971 through 1974 can thus be visualized as an island in this policy stream of continuous efforts to displace the United States in the world. Like an island, detente did not halt the surrounding process.

This does not signify that the members of the Politburo were ever oblivious to the effects that their Third World activities could have on their bilateral dealings with America. On the contrary, although this consideration was surely more important to the Politburo in some periods than in others, it was generally a factor in Soviet policy formulation. However, it was never, at any stage, allowed to become a dominant consideration.

SOVIET EFFORTS TO EXPLOIT U.S. VULNERABILITIES

In addition, Soviet handling of the bilateral relationship with the United States over the last decade was profoundly influenced by the asymmetrical vulnerabilities of the United States that grew as a result of changes in U.S. society as the decade went on.

These vulnerabilities were created by the successive effects of the Vietnam war, its disastrous outcome, and the Watergate constitutional crisis:

- First, in causing a decay of the foreign policy consensus in the U.S. elite. That consensus is far from fully restored to this day.

- Second, in promoting an erosion of the power of the Presidency at the hands of competing power centers with different attitudes toward the world and toward the Soviet Union.
- And third, in multiplying and institutionalizing the indiscipline of the U.S. elite and the U.S. government, most dramatically reflected, of course, in the practice of leakage, which during the 1970s became a cancer that is still growing.

Soviet perception of these American vulnerabilities affected Soviet conduct in a variety of ways.

In the first place, it encouraged the Soviet propensity to seek to draw the United States into *ambiguous generalized mutual pledges*. As a rule, these were so phrased as to fail to bind the Soviet Union to anything specific; yet they had the potential for some constraining effect upon the American public and therefore government because of the different conditions prevailing in the United States.

- The leading example of such a disastrous ambiguous pledge was provided by Article II of the SALT I Interim Agreement signed in May 1972, which pledged the two sides not to convert light ICBM launchers into heavy ones. In the absence of any quantitative definition of light and heavy missiles, which the Soviets refused to accept, the Soviet leaders were later enabled legally to make conversions of a kind that the United States hoped the Agreement had prevented—notably involving the SS-19. This fact eventually proved quite damaging to U.S. interests. The Soviets would certainly have made the conversions in question in any case, with or without an Agreement. But the erroneous expectations created by Article II for some time served in the United States as tacit consolation and illusory compensation for continued U.S. inaction in the face of the Soviet strategic buildup.
- In the text of the statement on "Basic Principles" of the Soviet-U.S. relationship also signed in 1972, a similarly unspecific pledge was made to abstain from "efforts to obtain unilateral advantage at the expense of the other, directly or indirectly." The context implied that this pledge of self-denial did not refer merely to strategic weapons programs, but to geopolitical conduct generally. The Soviet leaders clearly took for granted that this sweeping and highly unrealistic promise was not seriously intended, and they probably assumed that the U.S. government also thought so. But such statements as this, surrounded by the package of other agreements signed in 1972 and 1973, fueled U.S. public perception of the advance of a benign, nonantagonistic Soviet attitude toward the United States, a

fact that was useful to the Soviet Union until undermined by the revelations of the October 1973 war.

- Another, more recent example of Soviet proferring of ambiguous, unenforceable pledges occurred in the Carter Administration. This was the Soviet proposal—in this case not accepted—for equal percentage reductions in announced Soviet and U.S. military budgets. Because U.S. budget figures are published and debated in great detail, whereas the Soviet military budget is publicly portrayed in a one-line item whose total is grossly misleading and does not necessarily indicate even the trend in Soviet military spending, this proposal was unusually egregious. Its repetition to the United States therefore suggested a certain thinly disguised contempt.

A second area in which the Soviets sought to exploit the vulnerabilities latent in U.S. society was *the economic sphere*, where the Soviets, very much like Mr. Kissinger, sought political advantage from construction of a web of economic relationships with the competitor.

In this regard, the Soviets found themselves aided by the great disparity between the position of the Soviet agencies involved, fundamentally responsive to a single political will, and the multiplicity of U.S. interests they dealt with. This disparity was also reflected in the lack of consensus within U.S. society and government as to the extent to which economic relations with the Soviet Union should relate to U.S. political aims. As a result, there has also been a lack of effective U.S. government mechanisms to prioritize and enforce such aims.

The Soviets therefore believed in the 1970s that their ongoing contacts with U.S. business leaders offered a vehicle for indirect pressure on the U.S. government, and not only on trade matters. In particular, the Soviets assumed until the end of the decade that the U.S. business and agricultural communities had acquired sufficient vested interest in the relationship with Moscow to constrain the U.S. government from drastic action at the expense of Soviet economic interests, regardless of what the Soviet Union did elsewhere in the world to the detriment of U.S. political interests. The Soviets were therefore surprised and disappointed to find, at the end of the decade, that important though those U.S. vested interests were, they were at least temporarily insufficient to deter the United States from economic reprisals.

A third area in which the Soviets have been helped by internal U.S. vulnerabilities is more generally recognized. This is the sphere of *interaction abroad*.

The Politburo was of course gratified by the practical consequences for Soviet policy created by the weakening of the U.S. Presidency in the last half of the 1970s. From the time of the airlift the Soviet Union

staged into Angola in 1975 to that of the airlift into Kabul in 1979, one of the factors that underpinned Politburo decisions was assurance of an internally enfeebled U.S. reaction, in political as well as military terms.

During the Ford and Carter administrations, there was a multiplication of public and private U.S. official warnings to the Soviet Union to desist or refrain from specific actions—from Soviet intervention in Angola to Soviet intervention in Ethiopia to Soviet incarceration of Shcharansky to Soviet naval use of Cam Ranh Bay to Soviet retention of the "brigade" in Cuba. These U.S. warnings were so regularly found to be devoid of specific consequences when routinely ignored as to inculcate a Soviet attitude of familiar contempt toward such demarches. The Soviet leaders were therefore, again, rather surprised when this pattern was at last broken, and when one more such warning—regarding Afghanistan—was finally followed by important consequences.

All the advantages that the Soviets thus extracted from U.S. pluralism and the weakened Presidency were accompanied by one major disadvantage for the Soviets themselves. This was the fact that they found the United States increasingly unable to carry out agreements providing the benefits for the sake of which the Politburo had entered detente in the first place.

It will be recalled that initially Mr. Kissinger had hoped, through the detente process, to create a web of incentives that might ultimately lead the Politburo to see Soviet self-interest in restraint from actions infringing on U.S. interests. It is quite possible that even the unrealistically large economic benefits once envisioned as flowing to the Soviet Union from the detente relationship with the United States might not have sufficed for this purpose. Even the huge long-term U.S. and Japanese capital investments in Soviet energy production discussed in the first half of the 1970s, had they materialized, might not have been sufficient to induce the Soviet leadership to refrain from seizing the qualitatively new opportunities for geopolitical profit at U.S. expense that appeared in Africa after 1975.

In any case, however, partly because of the weakened Presidency, this issue became moot after the middle of the decade. The turning point was reached with the passage of the Stevenson Amendment to the Export-Import Bank Bill over the wishes of the Administration in December 1974, drastically reducing the total of credits that might be extended to the Soviet Union. Thereafter, the faint possibility that bilateral economic dealings with the United States might inhibit Soviet competitive appetites—highly problematical in the best of circumstances—has rapidly disappeared.

THE POLITBURO'S PRESENT EXPECTATIONS

Looking back over the panorama of Soviet-U.S. competition of the last decade, what does the Politburo think of the United States as a competitor today, and what does it think the prospects are for the next decade?

First, with the coming of the new U.S. administration, it seems clear that the Soviet leadership has become genuinely concerned about U.S. arms programs and the possibility of a new U.S. assertiveness. But at the same time, the Politburo is probably by no means yet convinced that the United States can furnish either the military—or even less the political prerequisites—for effective opposition to further gradual Soviet advance.

The Politburo probably believes it is by no means clear that a solid foreign policy consensus has been restored in the United States, or that the enervating effects of U.S. pluralism will cease to hamper the U.S. ability to act abroad. On the contrary, it probably considers that these weights will continue to encumber Mr. Reagan as they did his predecessors.

The Politburo probably also believes that the differences between the United States and certain of its allies that have appeared in recent years transcend issues of personality and reflect a different sense of national interest that the Soviet Union can exploit to widen the fissures. The Soviet leaders will certainly continue to try to do so.

Regarding the Third World, the Politburo probably believes that the contraction of U.S. influence seen in the last decade as a result of radical upheaval or post-colonial insurgency has not yet run its course—in Latin America, the Middle East, or southern Africa. Whatever the United States does or does not do in a military way to counter, the Soviets probably expect growing political opportunities for themselves.

In respect to China, the Politburo remains concerned about the trend toward Sino-U.S. cooperation but probably believes it is not firmly established and may eventually be weakened, possibly by an exacerbation of Sino-U.S. bilateral difficulties on matters such as Taiwan. The Soviets may also count upon the effects on the Chinese leadership of continued growth in the Soviet power to intimidate and upon further demonstration of U.S. inadequacies.

Finally, in what the Politburo considers its own inner sphere, the Soviet leaders are well aware of the grave difficulties they face. In particular, they are concerned over growing secular problems in the Soviet economy whose effects will be increasingly felt in the next few years and, more immediately, over the ongoing crisis with Poland and the severe dilemma it has created for Soviet policy.

But the evidence of Soviet behavior strongly suggests that the

Soviet leaders are determined to try to isolate their external ambitions from the effects of their internal difficulties. The Politburo does not yet appear to believe that these troubles, serious though they are, will necessitate any political concessions to the United States—that is to say, will require any constraints to be placed on Soviet efforts to expand the Soviet external position at American expense. Moreover, although the very grave problems faced by the Soviet economy could some day compel a slowing of the growth of Soviet military spending, there is no reason to believe that this day is near at hand, nor that the Soviet leaders think it is.

In short, the Soviets probably do not yet believe that their internal difficulties will seriously hamper their efforts in the world competition with the United States over the next decade. Meanwhile, the profound underlying hostility that drives Soviet competitive policies with respect to the United States also shows no sign of abating.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

No panacea or detailed blueprint for improving America's ability to manage the long-term competition emerges from this review of Soviet attitudes and behavior. The few observations of a general nature that follow are put forward in full awareness of the substantial cultural and institutional difficulties involved in implementing them.

First, any effective U.S. strategy for managing the competition with the Soviet Union over the long haul must be heavily dependent upon America's ability to restore coherence to global policy.

- This means, among other things, the ability of the U.S. leadership to rebuild a broad foreign policy consensus. The U.S. ability to do this will always be influenced to some degree by the course of Soviet behavior, and to that extent will be beyond the control of any American leadership. The viability of such a consensus will also be heavily influenced, however, by the wisdom shown by U.S. leaders in the choice of particular issues to emphasize to the American public as symbolizing the national stake in the Soviet-American competition.
- The strength of a consensus on policy toward the Soviet Union will also be affected by the U.S. stance taken toward the ambiguous mutual pledges that the USSR may continue to propose. Experience suggests, for example, that renewed attempts to agree upon a code of conduct with the Soviet Union may be counterproductive, because in view of the asymmetries between the two societies any such document will again be likely

to hamper the United States far more than it will the Politburo.

- In addition, the evolution of an effective strategy for this competition will depend upon the restoration of self-discipline within the foreign policy machinery of the U.S. government. The institutionalization and virtual legitimization of "leakage" over the last decade has been harmful to the interests of the United States not merely because it has exposed secrets to the Soviet Union, although that has been serious enough. More profoundly, this practice has promoted policy incoherence by facilitating the actions of those within each administration who have sought to influence or paralyze the course of policy generation through the manipulation of external pressures.

Second, with regard to the form of U.S. bilateral dealings with the Soviet Union, it is highly desirable that the United States seek more reciprocity and a greater degree of symmetry in this relationship. Much of the existing asymmetry is structural and inevitable and cannot be removed without doing damage to values Americans cherish. But some of the asymmetry is self-inflicted and unnecessary and can be reduced. For example, it would be very much in the interests of the United States for more U.S. business with the Soviet leadership to be conducted through an American Ambassador in Moscow, instead of primarily through Mr. Dobrynin in Washington, and for the American Ambassador to be kept privy to bilateral matters known to Dobrynin. That has frequently not been the case in the past. It would also be most desirable for the United States to spend sufficient money on the U.S. embassy in Moscow to reduce the number of Soviet citizens who must be employed there, and who can be assumed as a matter of course also to be employed by the KGB. The toleration of such anomalies as this is pernicious for the health of the bilateral relationship and harmful both to U.S. self-respect and to the respect the Soviet leaders should have for the United States.

Finally with regard to the content of the U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union, two imperatives seem particularly important:

- An effort should be made to establish a national consensus, and a consistent strategy based on that consensus, as to what the U.S. economic relationship with the Soviet Union should be and how it should relate to American political aims in the world-wide competition.
- A similar concerted effort should be made to reach more general agreement on the aims and goals of U.S. policy toward the PRC, and to strive to match those goals against the purposes of American policy toward the Soviet Union.

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